DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 449 107 SO 032 505

AUTHOR Russell, Lynn P.
TITLE Johannes Vermeer: Legacy of Light. Teacher's Guide. School Arts: Looking/Learning.
INSTITUTION National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 1998-11-00
NOTE 9p.; For other guides from the same preparing institution, see SO 032 504-509.
AVAILABLE FROM National Gallery of Art, 4th and Constitution Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20565. For full text: http://www.nga.gov/education/teachers.htm.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Art Activities; *Art Education; *Art History; *Artists; Cultural Context; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Painting (Visual Arts)
IDENTIFIERS Netherlands; Seventeenth Century; *Vermeer (Jan)

ABSTRACT

This teaching guide gives a brief overview of The Netherlands during Johannes Vermeer's career and describes and discusses his painting "The Girl in the Red Hat." The guide presents illustrations of four of Vermeer's paintings. It suggests activities for elementary school, middle school, and high school. (BT)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 449 107

Johannes Vermeer: Legacy of Light

A Guide for Teachers

Johannes Vermeer, Girl with the Red Hat, c. 1665/1666.

F. P. Smith

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

SO 032 505

National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Johannes Vermeer: Legacy of Light

Teacher's Guide

This teaching guide was prepared by Lynn P. Russell, Head, Adult Programs, Education Division, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Additional information is available on the National Gallery's web site at **http://www.nga.gov**

Copyright ©1998 National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

Johannes Vermeer: Legacy of Light

He brings us, under his mantle, into a world withdrawn from trouble where peace and light...may be found without limit.
-- Thomas Bodkin on Vermeer

The Artist

Born in the Netherlands in 1632, Johannes Vermeer was a native of the prosperous, bustling town of Delft. Nothing is known about his preparation to be a painter. Nevertheless, we do know that by the age of twenty-one he had completed his training; on December 29, 1653 he registered as a master painter with the Saint Luke's Guild, an organization of artists in Delft.

At the beginning of his career, Vermeer painted a few pictures with subjects taken from the Bible and classical mythology. Like many of his contemporaries, he ultimately specialized in painting scenes from everyday life. Vermeer focused on images of women, usually engaged in quiet domestic activities in light-filled rooms. His treatment of light suggests that he knew the work of Rembrandt, who lived in nearby Amsterdam.

In fact, Vermeer knew many artists' works, because he was also an art dealer. Johannes' father Reynier had sold art too. When Reynier died in 1652, Vermeer inherited his father's business as well as the house and inn, named Mechelen, that his parents had operated on Delft's Market Square. These businesses helped Vermeer to support his wife Catharina Bolnes, whom he married in April, 1653, and their eleven children. When Vermeer died at the age of forty-three in 1675, he left a small number of paintings. Although only thirty-five of his pictures have survived, his artistic legacy is remarkable.

The Context

During the seventeenth century the Netherlands became an independent Protestant republic after freeing itself from the domination of Catholic Spain. While a final peace treaty was not signed until 1648, the Dutch had begun to develop politically and economically in the early 1600s. Largely through the commercial ventures of enterprising Dutch businessmen, the Netherlands became one of the greatest economic and maritime powers of the period. Its well-to-do merchants were also great patrons of the arts, many of whom preferred naturalistic pictures of Dutch life.

The Work

The Girl with the Red Hat is a painting that is widely loved and admired for its intimacy and its immediacy. Although a tiny picture, only nine by about seven inches (23 x 18 cm), it is filled with light and a sense of life. The girl turns toward the viewer, with her

mouth half opened and her eyes bright with expectancy. She communicates directly with us, addressing us with her eyes, and so drawing us in. The lushness of her blue dress, the intense flame-red of her hat, and the understated play of green and rose tones in her face give her a vibrancy unique among Vermeer's paintings.

Often in pictures such as Woman Holding a Balance, Vermeer portrayed a figure who is self-contained and quietly engrossed in a domestic task. But the girl with the red hat communicates directly with us, both staring out and drawing us in. Part of the painting's liveliness comes from the way in which Vermeer animates the variety of depicted materials through the reflection of light on their surfaces. Highlights glow softly on the feathery broad-brimmed red hat, flash from the girl's blue cloak and white cravat, flicker across the lion heads that decorate the chair in the foreground, and sparkle from the girl's eyes and moist lips.

For the Viewer

In making this painting so lifelike, Vermeer may have tried to create effects he saw in an optical device called a camera obscura. Optics, the science of vision and perspective, was a burgeoning field of inquiry in seventeenth-century Holland. Vermeer and his contemporaries shared this interest using devices such as mirrors, lenses, and the camera obscura to understand how the eye perceives the natural world. Invented in sixteenth-century Italy, the camera obscura (Italian for "dark chamber") is a forerunner of the modern camera, although the image it creates is not permanent. A camera obscura creates an image when light entering a darkened box through a tiny hole is focused upon the opposite interior surface by means of a convex lens.

Camera obscura images are characterized by intense colors and accentuated contrasts of light and dark. Unfocused accents of light often appear as diffused spots. The presence of these effects in Vermeer's paintings demonstrates that he was familiar with the optical device. Yet Vermeer did not simply copy images seen through a camera obscura. For example, the highlights on the girl's robe would appear more blurred in a camera obscura than they do in the painting. The Girl with a Red Hat may have been inspired by a view through the fascinating optical box, but in his imaginative handling of pose, colors, and optical effects, Vermeer created a picture that goes beyond mere observation. And it still enthralls viewers today.

Key Concepts and Themes

The Girl with the Red Hat is not a narrative picture; it does not tell a story. It is, however, about seeing life, engagement with other people, the attraction of a momentary glance, and the potential beauty of objects around us. The meanings of Vermeer's pictures are usually suggested rather than specific. He painted images of everyday life in such a way as to encourage viewers to use their own life experiences to help them see the basic human truths in his pictures.

Johannes Vermeer: Legacy of Light

1.

2.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

3.

4.

Captions

1. Girl with a Flute, probably 1665/1670, oil on panel, 1942.9.98
2. Girl with the Red Hat, c. 1665/1666, oil on panel, 1937.1.53
3. A Lady Writing, c. 1665, oil on canvas, 1962.10.1
4. Woman Holding a Balance, c. 1664, oil on canvas, 1942.9.97

ACTIVITIES

Questions About the Painting *Girl with Red Hat.*

What do you think this painting is about?

Which details of the image give it a true sense of life?

Why do you think Vermeer painted it?

Elementary

Sketch a classmate or yourself (with the help of a mirror), while attempting to capture fleeting, lifelike expressions.

Experiment by changing the distance between you and your subject and the angle from which you work. Vary the position of the head and the body. Alter the amount of the body that you include. Use different props. Which images are most lifelike?

Middle School

Buy a one-time use camera and take photographs of one another, conducting an experiment similar to the one described above.

High School

Find information about the camera obscura in a library or on the Internet and make a simple version of the optical device. It is fascinating to view both figures and outdoor scenes through the camera obscura. Remember that these devices were available more than four hundred years ago.

Resources

Alpers, Svetlana. The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Westermann, Mariet. A Worldly Art: The Dutch Republic, 1585-1718. New York: Abrams, 1996.

Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. Jan Vermeer. New York: Abrams, 1981, 2nd ed, 1988.

Wheelock, Arthur K. Jr. Vermeer and the Art of Painting. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.